

## *McNeal's Rant*

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*"McNeal's Rant" is a Scottish country dance, a 40-bar strathspey, and a variation of "The Black Dance," a 32-bar reel. It is danced by Ian and Abigail McNeal (first couple) and Rick and Rita Milton (third couple).*

**Bars 1–4:** First couple turns with the right hand.

Abby: I've been married before. So has he. So it's not like this kind of thing is new to me. Or him. It's amazing, though, how it still hurts as much as the first time. You'd think once you've been through it, you'd be immune to the pain. Like I've had my shot so it shouldn't bother me. But it does. Like I figured it's one thing we'd avoid whatever else goes wrong. Damn it all.

We met on a hike. My friend Frieda loves to find new places to tramp around so she's always studying maps, and begging friends to go with her 'cause she does know better than to set out into the hills alone. As good a way to spend my Saturday as any I figured. Get me off my butt, see some nature.

She made sure I wore the right kind of shoes along with my tight jeans and blue long-sleeved jersey, warm enough for the spring weather but not something that'd make me sweat. Even in the wilds, I want to look good. So we set off, Frieda leading and me hoping like hell she knew the way 'cause even though we had our cells, out there you didn't always get bars.

Doing fine until I stepped on a stone that rolled underfoot, making

me stumble and damn if I didn't sprain my ankle. I sat on a log and took off my shoe to see if the ankle was broken, it hurt that much. It wasn't, but when I went to put the shoe back on, my foot was so swollen, I couldn't. What to do? Call the Royal Mounties? Only they don't travel in them thar hills. I tried hobbling along with one stocking foot but that only made things worse.

Then, like some kind of magic act, a guy and a girl came along the trail behind us. And he immediately knelt to feel my ankle.

"Are you a doctor?" I said in total disbelief.

"Nope." He looked up with a grin. "Boy Scout leader. I was showing Marla here where my troupe went camping last summer." I couldn't help noticing his intense blue eyes.

I checked on Marla. She didn't seem to be treasuring the treat exactly.

He took off into the brush and we could hear him thrashing around. Killing some wild animal? Who knew? When he came back, he held a sturdy stick with a curved end.

"Try this as a kind of crutch."

I fit it under my arm, standing with his help, and took a step.

"Any better?"

I gave a smile. "Yeah. I can hobble with it."

"Still a long way to go. You're parked at the junction, right?"

Frieda nodded.

"Okay." He was clearly used to giving orders. He nodded at Marla and Frieda. "Why don't you two head back and I'll help this lady along in case she can't manage."

Marla was off back down the trail before he finished and I figured

whatever they had going on between them was about to go *phutt*. Frieda looked at me. "You okay with this?"

"It's the best we can do." I said, wondering if I was putting myself in the hands of an ax murderer. And I hobbled a ways down the path to show I was willing to try it.

Didn't think of it at the time but I should have made note of his willingness to leave the woman he was with for another. God, how stupid is that?

**Bars 5–8:** First couple turns with the left hand.

*Ian:* So I tried it a second time, this marriage game. Yeah, I know it's not a game, something more serious. But gee-whiz, with all the books and articles about how to keep your marriage fresh, it's become a kind of game. How many years was it the first time? Six? Uh-oh, the seventh, known to be trouble. Like the ninth inning with the bases loaded. A good chance you'll strike out.

That's what I did with Rosie. No matter how hard I tried, she just wasn't there. Somewhere else, it seemed like, some dream world where husbands lived only to keep their wives happy. "You never..." she'd say first thing in the morning, like she'd been mulling it over all night, thinking *What can I complain about next?* So – I never emptied the bathroom wastebasket. Like I'm the janitor but doing the dishes every night didn't count. Picky, picky.

Ah well. No use getting ticked off all over again. It's past, she's gone, and I met Abby. Funny how we met. Just walking the familiar trail, getting a real reading from Marla that this was not her thing. Then we come upon this gal in trouble. But what a honey. Honey-gold

hair for one thing. And a figure to knock your socks off. After I helped her to her friend's car, Marla hissed at me all the way back to her place, but I didn't care. I'd met the right one at last.

Abby's so easy to be with. If I suggest doing something, she doesn't just say *Okay* with a shrug. She gets right into it, checking details on the computer, calling for reservations, whatever. I love that enthusiasm. It makes me feel like I know what I'm doing even when I don't.

She moved in with me a month before the wedding and my apartment worked out fine for the first year. Then one day I stood by the window watching the guy in the house across the street mow his lawn and said, "I'd like to be doing that." Abby came over, arm around my waist, watched with me. Next I knew, she's checking real estate sites on the Internet, making a list, finding an agent. Long story short, here we are in our own little home with a green lawn outside plus a dogwood tree by the dining room window – couldn't be nicer. And with her helping the way she did, it was like someone waved a wand and shh-boom, it happened.

Boy Scouts? I became a leader after Rosie said she didn't want kids. They were pleading for leaders and I figured one meeting a week during the school year, how tough can that be? Well, it wasn't easy, not at first. I'd only had one brother to tussle with, not seven. But the fellows and I, we worked it out. I got to know how hard to push them, when to let go. And they liked it. One of the moms told me her son quotes me more than his dad. So I'm a father surrogate. Kind of funny when you think of it.

And Abby goes along, bakes cookies for special meetings, makes

sure I got everything in my backpack when I'm off camping with the troupe. We've talked about a family. She's interested, now she's in her thirties. Her job is kind of an issue. They don't give much time for maternity leave and she doesn't want to scant on bringing up baby. Not one to do things half-assed. And we need the two salaries right now. So we'll see.

But honest, I didn't mean to get us into this pickle. It's one of those things you start with the best intentions. And then it goes off the rails and what you thought was the right thing to do becomes the wrong thing. Ahh . . .

**Bars 9–12:** First man leads first woman down to third place, leaves her with third man, turns to third woman.

*Abby:* This house we found is in a real nice neighborhood. Some weekends all the guys are out mowing their lawns. That makes a racket, but you can't complain when it keeps the street looking good. Our best friends Rick and Rita live in a condo across town and Rick likes to tease Ian about how much time he puts into tending our yard. I think they're jealous. We share suppers every Saturday night, one week our place, next week theirs. Rita told us last month she's expecting. Just three months along, hardly showing but I saw how Ian's eyes lit up. We talked about it after. I'm not ready yet, so he feels he's missing out. But he's not the one who gets to do the heavy lifting, growing a belly, gaining weight and then the delivery which I don't even want to think about. He can just pick up the result and show him off while I'm left with the smelly diapers.

I know I shouldn't go there. That's not the real reason I hesitate.

I'm healthy, I'd probably do just fine. But then you've got this creature, like a dog you picked up at the pound only you can't take it back if you change your mind. I mean that lady who sent her Russian kid home on a plane – if we all could do that, how many moms would try? You're probably saying I'm just shirking responsibility. But jeez, eighteen years is a long time to feed and clothe a kid. They say you love 'em so much you don't mind. Well, maybe.

So then Rick breaks his leg hiking. That's how Ian met him, years back, hiking. They do that a lot, belong to the Sierra Club and all. Rick had to be rescued by Rangers, carried down off the escarpment. A compound fracture so his leg has nuts and bolts in it. I made a casserole and took it over to help Rita with the meals. Then of course, because it always happens this way – when you got one big problem, a second one joins in. Their car broke down, transmission went, had to be towed. Rita had an ultrasound scheduled and Rick couldn't be left alone yet. The hospital's in the worst part of town so Ian said he'd drive Rita and I'd stay with Rick. Always the Boy Scout leader, that man.

**Bars 13–16:** First man leads third woman up to the top; they set to each other.

*Ian:* The traffic wasn't so bad, but finding a parking place was crazy. I let Rita off at the hospital entrance and drove around and up, then around and down through the parking garage, finally came on a car backing out. By the time I got to her doctor's office, Rita was deep inside. They'd said she could bring a friend in with her and I kinda wanted to see what it was like, get a sense of the next generation before they're fully human. But the Nazi at the desk didn't like my

looks I guess – said only her husband could go in. Even explaining Rick’s handicap didn’t help. She looked like my third grade teacher when I told her our dog peed on my homework. So I had to sit out there and read about movie stars in *People* magazine.

**Bars 17–20:** First man and third woman dance back to back, while third man and first woman dance back to back.

*Abby:* Rita left a big pot of coffee and I brought along some blueberry muffins, settled us in the living room, Rick and I. He was on their leather couch, leg up with its contraption, pillows all around him. On pain killers so he was kind of out of it. I turned the TV to one of those morning talk shows to fill the air so we didn’t have to make conversation. Cleared away our dishes. Washed up. Not only our coffee mugs but their breakfast dishes. Cleaned the counters. Got myself more coffee. Checked the bedroom, straightened the bed in case Rick wanted to go back there. Finished my coffee. Washed and dried the mug.

An hour has passed so they should be coming back any minute. I stand by the window where I can see the parking lot. A silver car turns in. I straighten, watch it ease into a space. A man in a business suit gets out. Not Ian. After fifteen minutes, I hear Rick stirring and go to see him. “They should be back any time now.” But they aren’t.

Yawn. It’s eleven thirty, two plus hours since Rita’s appointment. I call Ian’s cell but it goes to voice mail. Where the hell are they? An ultrasound is not exactly a life-threatening procedure. Just this little gadget oozing around your belly on jelly. At least that’s my understanding.

Rick clears his throat. “Um, Abby. I hate to say this but I need to get to the john.”

I stand up. That's the trouble with coffee. Goes right through you.  
"Right. Tell me what to do."

*Ian:* The whole thing was over in twenty minutes. But then Rita had to wait for the doc to read the results. She settled next to me and began to fidget. "What's wrong?" I asked. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. It's just...the technician, Gawd. She looked to be thirteen, kept staring at the screen, then running her whatsit over the same spot. I stared too but it just looked like some alien critter. You know, great big head with those little wiggly arms and legs. So hard to think it's human."

"It'll be fine." I wanted to reassure her. Women can get worked up over the smallest thing.

Then the nurse comes and takes her off to the doctor's office.  
Another wait but I figure Abby and Rick are doing okay.

Rita comes back a different person. Clutching her face, then her belly, shaking her head, shaking all over. "I can't... I can't . . ."

I get up and grab her shoulders. "Hold on now. What's the matter?"

"Ohhhh . . ." she wails, digging her forehead against my shoulder.  
"The baby. It's not right. It's got spine, uhh...spina bifida."

"What's that?" Frankly it doesn't sound good.

"The spine," she gives a deep sob, "it didn't close over."

"Well, can't they fix it?" Seems to me they come up with some new treatment every week for these things.

"Sure. Of course." She pulls back to stare at me, her cheeks flushed and wet. "Operations. Right away and later. In and out of the hospital. I just read about a woman who had a child like that. A handicapped



child. And," she's almost choking, "I already have a husband who can't walk and now I'll have a kid in a wheelchair..." Her voice rises as she goes on, and on.

The women in the waiting room gawk at us. I try shushing Rita, but she's way past hearing me or anyone.

"I didn't think this would happen to me." A high wail. Loud sobs. The only other man there frowns like it's my fault.

I urge her toward the door. "Come on. We'll talk, but not here." She doesn't want to move but I get her out in the hall finally, hand her my handkerchief to wipe her face which is all red and dripping tears. Don't they have some process for this? Social worker or something? I mean what kind of doctor tells you your kid's a basket case and then waves you out the door?

When I ask, she says, "The doctor sent for someone but I didn't want to wait. I needed to get out of there, out of this whole fucking..."

I drive her over to the beach because that's where Abby and I go for sunsets and some canoodling. When we've had an argument, it beats any single malt for calming things down. We get out of the car and walk toward the water. The wind blows Rita's words away, back toward town where nobody'd understand them. The waves are rolling in, rising in huge heaps and thumping down on the beach, then dragging back, like fingers across the blackboard. When she finally runs down, having said all she could and then some, I look at her.

"You've got some choices," I say quietly. We four'd never discussed abortion.

"But I couldn't . . ." She stares at me, shaking her head. "It's our child, Rick's and mine. We can't just... Ohh." She starts sobbing again.

"You need to talk to him about it. This is his problem too, you know."

A big snuffle. I can see her nodding. "Yeah. He has to know."

Another big wave rolls in and crashes down, like a drumbeat from hell.

"But not yet. Do you mind? I just have to get my head around it first." She sinks down on the sand. I sink down next to her. What else can I do?

**Bars 21–24:** First man leads third woman down to third place, leaves her with the third man, turns to first woman.

*Abby:* When Ian and Rita walk in, I have to bite my tongue not to holler, *Where the hell have you been all this time? And why didn't you answer your cell?* Guilty on all counts I'd say from the looks of them. Their clothes rumpled, sand littering the carpet. They were on the beach! Our beach! How could he? Their faces so flushed, Rita's hair a mess. If that doesn't look like a tumble in the hay...Oh, Ian, I might have known. And I trusted you. Boy Scout leader. Ha!

*Ian:* I can see Abby is mad at me. And I want to yell, *I just spent an hour calming a hysterical female, for Christ's sake. I'd rather chew tacks.*

Thing is, Rita swore me to secrecy, said she'd tell Rick when the time was right. But from the look on his face, this is not the time. And there she goes, off to the john to fix herself up. I guess we do look kinda scruffy.

*Abby:* Crap. Rick watches Rita leave, then stares at Ian. "What's up?" he says. First Ian shrugs. Wrong. That only makes things worse. Then he shakes his head. "I can't say. Rita...um...it's something..."

“Oh, for Pete’s sakes,” I say. “You went to the beach and had sex. Pretty obvious.”

Ian’s head jerks back like he’s been socked. “What?” And then he says “OhGodohGod . . .,” shaking his head over and over.

Rita comes out of the bathroom, puts her hands on her hips, glares at Ian. “So you told them. Even after you promised me. You bum.”

“No, no. Honest. Not a word.” Ian catches his breath and holds up his hands like he’s surrendering. “But they think we . . .”

Rick breaks in. “Would somebody please tell me what the hell’s going on here.” He pounds the couch arm.

“Oh, Rick.” Rita goes over and kneels by him. “The ultrasound. It showed...it showed . . .” She looks at Ian who nods. She begins to sob. “Our baby’s not perfect. She has a problem.”

**Bars 25–28:** First man leads his partner to the top; they cast into second place on own sides.

Abby: I’m so pissed at Ian I can hardly bear to sit next to him in the car, where Rita sat. No matter what really happened, to take her off to the beach while we were waiting...our beach, our special place. So his cell battery died. Well, he’ll get an earful from his voicemail when he charges it.

He pulls into our drive and I get out, stomp into the house. Have to admit, I kinda feel like a fifth grader, mad at not being chosen for the school chorus. Childish? Yeah. But even so, he had to know how guilty they looked. So he’s one of those rare men with empathy, willing to listen, offer advice. Anyone else would have driven her back to her hubby faster’n the speed of light.

I should know him by now. Look at how he was with me when the bitch Dodie at work got promoted to that job I wanted. Well, sort of wanted. He didn't point out that it would mean working for Hairy Louis who chews tobacco and keeps a spittoon in his office. Didn't remind me how often I came home saying it made me want to puke. Actually, I'm still waiting to see how Dodie deals with it.

I have to admit, he did the right thing. Calmed Rita down before she faced Rick. Not an easy job. How would I feel in those circumstances? Pretty glad I have Ian to lean on.

I stand back and look at him, still the man for me. He's watching with those intense eyes, his mouth slowly curling up in a smile.

With a sigh I lean against him. And he murmurs something into my hair. And we go upstairs, end up on the bed. Mmmm . . .

**Bars 29–32:** First couple dances a gypsy turn, no hands, all eye contact.

*Ian:* Stupid of me not to see how it must have looked to Abby and Rick. I just wanted to get Rita back on track before she did something silly. And Rick has enough on his plate. But of course, it's me being the leader of the troupe, acting like I'm in charge. Making the decisions for everyone else. Gotta think about that, work on myself. God knows I don't want Abby ever to suspect me of playing around. Specially after what her ex did.

We're downstairs again and she's leaning over the stove, brewing her green tea, brushing that honey gold hair back over her shoulder. We take our mugs out on the patio, letting the breeze gentle us.

"So," she says, "what do you think?"

Think? I'm supposed to think after dealing with that hormone

hurricane?

"About us," she says.

What about us? I figure we're kinda back on track. But maybe not?

She shifts around to look me in the eye. "About us having a kid.  
Or two or three."

My eyebrows shoot up to my hairline. With Rita's experience still  
in the headlines, how can she even . . .? "But you said . . ."

She nods. "Yeah, yeah. I made excuses. Now I'm thinking we  
shouldn't put it off. We're not getting any younger, and there'll be  
those sleepless nights." She grins.

"You're serious."

Another nod.

"I thought for sure this business with Rita would kill off any ideas  
I, that is, *we* had."

"That's why I'm bringing it up now. What happened today could  
happen to us, sure. But I think we could handle it. Couldn't we?"

I have to admit, if I weren't sitting down right now, I'd fall over. I  
reach out to draw her close, loving the feel of her, the smell of her, her  
great big heart.

"Sure we could."

**Bars 33–40:** All three couples join hands to dance six hands round  
and back.

*Abby:* I hated being mad at Ian. It was very special for me that  
we could work out our disagreements. I felt like celebrating so I  
threw a party for our friends and neighbors. Rita and Rick came, Rick  
maneuvering on crutches. He always was an athletic man.

Ian worked the barbecue in the backyard, we had a tub of ice for the beer, I made potato salad by the gallon and people brought all kinds of great food. When it began to get dark, Ian had us stand in a big circle to sing *Auld Lang Syne*. I could almost imagine I heard bagpipes in the distance. ▣